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The G.O.P.'s Long War Against Medicare and Social Security

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Politically, the most crucial moment in President Biden's State of the Union address was his declaration that "some Republicans want Medicare and Social Security to sunset every five years." Why did he say that? Maybe because Senator Rick Scott, when he was the chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, released a fiscal plan last year with the bullet point "All federal legislation sunsets in five years."

Seems straightforward, doesn't it, despite cries of "lies" from the floor? But right-wing news media — well aware that Biden hit a nerve — has gone into overdrive insisting that his claim was false. Even some mainstream media figures have claimed that Biden was "over the top."

The basis for these denunciations, as far as I can tell, is the idea that calling a plan to sunset legislation a plan to sunset legislation is somehow misleading, because voters don't know what "sunset" means. Indeed, just because the legislation authorizing a program comes to an end needn't mean that the program will die; Congress can always vote to reinstate it.

But, of course, many Republicans *do want* to eviscerate these programs. To believe otherwise requires both willful naïveté and amnesia about 40 years of political history.

First of all, if Republicans had absolutely no desire to make major cuts to America's main social insurance programs, why would they sunset them — and thus create the risk that they *wouldn't* be renewed? As Biden might say, c'mon, man.

And then there's that historical record. Two things have been true ever since 1980. First, Republicans have tried to make deep cuts to Social Security and Medicare every time they thought there might be a political window of opportunity. Second, on each occasion they've done exactly what they're doing now: claiming that Democrats are engaged in smear tactics when they describe G.O.P. plans using exactly the same words Republicans themselves used.

So, about that history. It has been widely forgotten, but soon after taking office Ronald Reagan proposed major cuts to Social Security. But he backed down in the face of a political backlash, leading analysts at the Cato Institute to call for a "Leninist" strategy — their word — creating a coalition ready to exploit a future crisis if and when one arrived.

To that end, Cato created the Project on Social Security Privatization, calling for replacing Social Security with individual accounts — which George W. Bush tried to do in 2005. By then, however, Cato had quietly renamed its project; "privatization" polled badly, and Bush insisted that it was a "trick word" used to "scare people."

So there's a history here, and there's a similar history for Medicare. Many people probably recall that Newt Gingrich shut down the federal government in 1995. I don't know how many people

realize that Gingrich's key demand was that President Bill Clinton agree to large cuts in Medicare and Medicaid.

After Republicans gained control of the House in 2010, Paul Ryan began pushing for major cuts in spending. One key element was converting Medicare from a system that pays medical bills to a system offering people fixed sums of money to be applied to the purchase of private insurance — that is, vouchers.

But many though not all supporters of the Ryan plan insisted that calling vouchers “vouchers” was a left-wing smear.

So are people who claim that Biden was over the top unaware of this track record? Do they really not know that Republicans have spent more than four decades trying to find ways to undermine Medicare and Social Security? Are they unaware that there's a long history of Republicans whining that Democrats are engaged in smear tactics when they describe Republican policies using exactly the same words Republicans used themselves until political consultants urged them to find euphemisms?

Well, I don't think Biden is going to let up. He knows (as do his hysterical opponents) that his attacks are effective, and he has the facts on his side.

Oh, and one Republican who might be especially vulnerable to Democratic attacks over social insurance programs is Ron DeSantis.

Before becoming Florida's governor, DeSantis enthusiastically endorsed Ryan's Medicare voucher proposal and declared that allowing seniors to retire in their late 60s was “unsustainable.”

As governor, DeSantis has made headlines with culture-war attacks on education and his opposition to public-health measures. But in some ways his biggest achievement, if you might call it that, has been blocking the expansion of Medicaid in his state under the Affordable Care Act; in so doing he's leaving hundreds of thousands of Floridians with no realistic way to get health insurance and is leaving billions in federal funds on the table.

True, Medicaid, unlike Medicare and Social Security, is means-tested. But it's also extremely popular; DeSantis's actions suggest that he's an ideologue who hates social programs on principle.

So to go back to our original premise, when Biden suggests that “some Republicans” want to eviscerate key programs, he's right; and Ron DeSantis is almost surely one of the Republicans he's right about.